

The Truth About Laughter

By H. ADDINGTON BRUCE

THE next time you see anybody laughing heartily at a humorous drawing, a funny incident in a moving-picture play, or the lines and action in a farce, don't fall into the common mistake of thinking that he ought to be more restrained in his expression of the amusement he feels. Instead, try to become a hearty laugh yourself, if you are not one already.

The prejudice against laughter as "bad form" can not be too vigorously opposed. It is a mischievous prejudice. Its result is to deprive people of an invaluable agent in maintaining mental and physical health. The increase in functional nervous and mental troubles, so evident in recent years, must certainly be attributed in part to the anti-laughing training many persons receive in youth. Also, the feeling against laughter has undoubtedly had a bad effect on the working ability of many people, by aggravating nervous stress and robbing them of a natural tonic that is most helpful to body and mind alike.

And, to make matters worse, opposition to laughter has grown with changed conditions of life that make laughter ever more necessary.

Just what happens when a person laughs?

Laughter Relieves Tension

IN the first place, there is an immediate feeling of relief from mental and bodily tension. It is an interesting fact, not generally appreciated, that the mere seeing or hearing of anything that appeals strongly to one's sense of humor instantly gives rise to peculiar physical conditions of more or less intensity. These have been variously described. Some years ago an investigator at Clark University asked a number of people how they felt the moment before they laughed. One replied that he always felt "a ticklish sensation in the stomach." Another spoke of "a funny feeling coming up from the stomach." A third had "a creepy feeling inside, spreading over the whole body." A fourth "must laugh or burst." A fifth found it "an immense strain to hold in." A sixth "felt full of something to the point of bursting." A seventh experienced "a quiver, thrill, or creepy feeling, passing up from the stomach to the mouth." And so on.

These feelings ceased as soon as those experiencing them laughed. They were, that is to say, manifestations of nervous energy seeking an outlet. This outlet they obtained in laughing, expressly provided as a natural safety-valve. To be sure, if one's sense of humor be entirely blotted out, so that nothing ever seems "funny," the physical sensations ordinarily finding a vent in laughter are not experienced. Then their repression would not cause nervous stress and disturbance, because they would not be there to be repressed. But, observe, it is not simply from this special form of nervous strain that laughter brings relief—it is from nervous strain in general.

Indeed, it seems scientifically sound to affirm that the sense of humor is given to man largely for the purpose of causing a sudden increase of nervous activity such as to compel, through laughter, a complete let-down of nervous tension. When a man laughs, his whole organism, so to speak, takes a momentary holiday. This is one of the principal reasons why the cultivation of laughter is so important in our own day and land.

As everybody knows, conditions of life

in this strenuous, complex civilization of ours are conditions of great strain. People have more to think about than used to be the case; there are more occasions for worry; the demands of modern professional, commercial, and industrial life are much more severe than in the primitive days of the founders of the Republic. Every opportunity of giving mind and nerves a chance for momentary rest should be eagerly seized. And, of all means offered by nature for attaining this desirable end, few compare with laughter. It may not be "refined" to laugh, but it is decidedly hygienic.

Besides, laughter has more than the negative value of securing temporary freedom from strain. It has a positive value of the utmost importance.

A Hearty Laugh Is a Tonic

EVERY time a person laughs—laughs heartily and unaffectedly—some noteworthy changes occur in the organs and

processes of his body. "A hearty laugh," I quote from an eminent medical authority, who is alive to the helpfulness of laughter from the doctor's point of view—"moves the diaphragm up and down vigorously, empties and ventilates the lungs, stimulates the heart mechanically by its action upon the intra-thoracic viscera, and is one of the best tonics that we have for the circulation in the abdominal cavity, and probably also for the important nervous mechanisms centered there."

Nor is the physical action of laughter confined to these local results. It has a directly stimulating effect on the whole muscular system, prompting and making easy a vigorous bodily movement. Through its beneficial effect on the lungs and the stomach, it improves the quality of the blood-supply to the brain. As a result the brain becomes better nourished than it would otherwise be. Consequently—except only in the case of a brain structurally inferior—it is rendered

better able to meet the incessant and extreme demand of modern life for quick, accurate, and forceful thinking.

Here another factor enters to double the favorable influence exercised on mind and body by laughter.

Everybody who is a hearty laugh is well aware that laughter, unless it be too prolonged, engenders a most pleasurable emotional state. It makes a man "feel good" mentally as well as physically.

Recent scientific researches have definitely established that pleasurable emotional states stimulate every vital process healthfully. They promote the digestion of food, its assimilation, the elimination of the waste products of digestion, the circulation of the blood, the action of the internal glands of secretion, etc. This means greater physical vigor, and it also means greater efficiency for one's daily work, whether that work be mental or manual. Hence laughter, psychologically as well as physiologically, is good for every man.

Let me pause a moment to add that these facts throw a luminous light on that much discussed problem, the frequency and ardor of laughter in childhood.

Children, unless their exuberance is too sternly repressed by unwise parents, always laugh more than adults. They find causes for laughter in anything and everything—in much that is not laughter-provoking at all to grown-up men and women.

Usually this is accounted for on the ground that children are care-free, that the reasoning faculty is not adequately developed in them, and that they are full of animal spirits. Now, in addition to all this, it becomes possible to see in their tendency to an abounding laughter the working out of a beneficent design. They may laugh because they are care-free, unthinking, and 'high-spirited'; but they also laugh in order to help their bodies grow, and in order to help promote the development of their minds, both by easing the strain of learning and by keeping their brains well nourished.

It Helps Children to Grow

ACCORDINGLY, children ought to be encouraged to laugh instead of being trained to be non-laughers, as too often is the policy nowadays. The trials and problems of life will soon put a sufficient check on their mirthfulness. Parents, for that matter, ought to make it a point to keep alive in their children the saving sense of humor. In later life the children will not need laughter to help them grow, but most assuredly they will need it to help them keep healthy and at a high level of working efficiency. Gloom and weakness go together; laughter and strength walk hand in hand.

More and more, it is to be observed, medical men are recommending laughter to their patients. That veteran New York physician, Doctor James J. Walsh, who has never had the reputation of being a "faddist," is loud in his praises of its upbuilding power. He even advises those who are weak in the sense of humor to practise laughing as a daily exercise.

"It seems almost absurd," he admits, "that a physician should tell patients that it will do them good to practise smiling, to take every possible opportunity to laugh, and even to take frequent glances into a looking-glass to see that they are not pulling long faces."

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